

Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum

21 January 2016 – Davos

**“Belgium, The Force Awakens”**

Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Alexander De Croo

On the Occasion of the Belgian Power Breakfast

Your Majesties,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Belgian Breakfast at the occasion of the World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting.

We are very honoured today to have His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen with us. This is one of the many signs that Belgium attaches to your presence here this morning.

I have to apologize our Prime Minister Charles Michel. He is expected to become father in the next hours - or days. Becoming father is a meeting with nature you cannot schedule, not even as a Prime Minister. But we are as excited as him and we wish him and his partner the very best.

Let me also welcome Minister President of Flanders, Geert Bourgeois.

Your Majesties,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

January is the usual time to take good resolutions for the year to come. I know what is the best resolution you can take at this point in time: to come and invest in Belgium. And I will tell you why is the right moment and the right place to do it.

Last year, Prime Minister Michel announced here that the new Belgian government was going to be a business friendly government. I can tell you: we have followed suit.

Over 14 months, we have worked very hard to reform our economy, our tax system and our employment market.

It is a pleasure for me to tell you that these reforms are today a reality. And I invite you to come and invest in this new framework.

What are these reforms?

- We have lowered the cost of labour significantly by lowering the charges an employer pays to hire workers. The nominal rate of employer’s social security contributions decreases from 33% today towards 25%.
- We have taken a series of measures to lower the costs of setting up a new business and to stimulate entrepreneurship.
- And we have significantly lowered the income tax, which will boost consumption.

With this strategy, we expect solid economic growth and 114.000 new jobs to be created in the next 3 years.

And this was our aim. Create a business friendly legislation. Increase our economic growth. Strengthen our social system.

That's why it is the right time to come and invest in Belgium. I invite you to take a close look at these reforms, and see for yourself which advantages they could bring to your business. Together with our regions, Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels, we have the tools to offer you an ideal base to set up or increase your presence in the heart of Europe.

And this concerns all sectors of activity. Be it in heavy industry, chemicals, services, pharma or high technology, our approach applies to the whole employment market.

These reforms have been praised by the European Union, the IMF and the OECD.

Lower costs of labour, lower taxes and a more flexible labour market.

I would say: "Belgium, the force awakens".

This is the time, and this is the place. Belgium will be your preferred destination.

Your Majesties,

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year's World Economic Forum is different than the previous ones.

All around the world, in every continent, we have been hit by a wave of terrorist attacks.

To respond to this treat, we have taken important measures in Belgium. Security is and remains an absolute priority and we have put the necessary human and financial resources to guaranty it.

Europe, Asia, Africa, America: we are all faced by this new treat of hatred and extreme radicalism and we must join hands to fight it.

Yet, the central theme here in Davos is positive, forward-looking. It is about growth and opportunities, the opportunities of the digital revolution.

In the coming years, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, will be one of the strongest drivers for growth, jobs and well-being.

From its foundation, Belgium has always been at the forefront of innovation. At the end of the First Industrial Revolution, the first commercial railway on the European continent was built in Belgium, between Brussels and Mechelen.

Our engineers played an important role in the Second Industrial Revolution. I think of the importance of the international Solvay Conferences in Brussels in the early 20th century.

And the Brussels World Fair of 1958 was a true celebration of the Third Industrial Revolution.

You will understand that Belgium is not afraid to re-invent itself for the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

That is why we have launched a clear-cut and concise action plan to embrace the digital change. The plan is called – plain and simple - ‘Digital Belgium’.

Our ambitions are strong.

Currently, Belgium is already one of the top five countries in the European Digital Society Index. But we want to do better.

We want Belgium to be one of the top three digital countries in Europe, with new start-ups to take root, new innovative services to be welcomed and thousands of new jobs to be created.

We want to make Belgium one of the most interesting places in Europe for young digital entrepreneurs to start and for established companies to innovate and to grow. Measures that are complementing to the quality of our universities, our skilled and multilingual workforce and our infrastructures.

Assets that are well-known and valued. By Volkswagen and Audi for example, who have announced yesterday that they will build their first electric SUV in Brussels.

Growth and innovation create confidence. They produce new ideas, new partnerships, renewed enthusiasm. The willingness to enterprise, to dare, to go to the next level. It is the essence of true entrepreneurship. And it is the reason why the private initiative stays at the heart of our government.

Your Majesties,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your attention, I wish you good and stimulating days here in Davos and I look very much forward to meet every one of you and to hear about your projects in Belgium. As I said, our Regions are at your disposal, and I give the floor to the Minister-President of Flanders, Geert Bourgeois.